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AUDACITY IN WOMEN NOVELISTS.

BY GEORGE PARSONS LATHROP.

IN HER paper on "Conversational Immoralities," in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* for April, Mrs. Amelia E. Barr urged forcibly—and with much good sense, as well as delicate feeling—that, since "words are realities" to the mind, and have the power to evoke deeds, the utmost care should be taken to put restrictions upon conversation in order to preserve a tone of purity, not only between men and women, but also among women themselves. Her warning also touched flattery, jealousy, satire, snubbing, and all the cardinal vices of social talk. But it was against conversation tending towards sensualism that her main attack was made; and her plea was especially earnest that the innocence of girls be kept unspotted from dangerous discussions of vice.

No one can deny the wisdom of her counsel and the merit of her aim. But when she falls back on the old idea that maiden innocence can be kept only by ignorance of things about which it is impossible for people to remain ignorant, she takes ground which is not only very debatable, but, in the minds of many sound thinkers, is also dangerous to the true interests of morality. She has been unfortunate if she has not met young women of perfect innocence who, with absolute propriety, purity, and modesty, could discuss with their accepted lovers the problem of "*La Traviata*." There are many young unmarried women in the United States who have observed and studied widely, who are familiar with the scenes and significance of hospitals; who know that larger field-hospital which includes the sin and suffering of more than half of society; but have never lost the fineness of their feminine nature. On the contrary, those who have seen such women must know that they are quite able to keep the grace and beauty and delicate charm that belong to them by right, yet to add to these a still nobler glory of womanhood. There may at times be peril in the work of young women undertaken as charity

toward the fallen of their sex, whom Mrs. Barr chooses rather to call by a coarser name. But if words have so much influence on the mind, can it be better to describe these "unfortunates" by a rough and coarse word than to use the gentler term?

After all, one must go deeper than the word and the letter, and must build upon the *spirit* of the young woman in order to make her safe from contamination. Decent and gentle words, interpreted by the spirit of a man or woman rightly trained, will be better than vile and contemptuous epithets. But, for the right training there must be clear knowledge, that puts various facts into their due relation. The withholding of knowledge, or, as we may say, ignorance arbitrarily imposed,—for the good, as it is believed, of a class or the mass,—is the basis of all repression, superstition, or benevolent despotism. If it be wise to impose it on young people in order to keep conversation pure, then it must be right to impose it on literature in order to keep that pure, by means of censorship. And if this is to be the ground-plan of women's life and thought, it follows that the utterances of women in books must always be more bounded and guarded than those of men.

Lately the plays of Ibsen have been much talked of among English-speaking folk, and it is to be noted that women especially are interested in them; some regarding Ibsen as the champion of their sex, while others treat him as their foe. Both parties start from the same premise—that Ibsen handles without reserve sundry abuses and defects in society and marriage. Yet they reach opposite conclusions. Who is to decide between them? Is it possible to keep this controversy from the knowledge of the young women? Even if it were possible, it still remains the right of all women to know what is going on that concerns them. But if we forbid them to talk about it, we must likewise forbid them to write. Again quite lately Tolstoi's novel, "The Kreutzer Sonata," has been barred from publication in Russia, because, as it is said, it favors wife-murder in the case of a loveless marriage. Here is a problem, one would say, which is of some interest to women. Murder will out—even if it be only an imaginary crime on paper; and the officially-suppressed book, though it cannot "out," is sure to get around surreptitiously. Yet a New York newspaper of high repute has come forward with an editorial article giving the gist of the book, thereby circulating the supposed harmful theory;

and then has declared that the Russian censor did well to suppress the work. Truly the sympathy diplomatically supposed to exist between Russia and the United States must be spreading apace! The shrewder plan would be—especially since this book is to be discussed editorially—to publish it, see what it is, and then refute its mistakes. If Russian students and young men of other nations are going into training to become the wife-murderers of the future, by means of a book privately circulated and openly considered, fair play demands that young women should have a chance to talk the matter over a little bit before they agree to be married and murdered. The more open the conference as to this matter of detail, the better would be the result for all persons concerned; and probably, as the conversation went on, the less would the young men want to kill the young women.

Meanwhile a number of very capable and generally irreproachable women have solved for themselves the question of free utterance in literature, without waiting for the adjustment of abstract theories or concrete regulations. This is a fact of great importance; especially when we bear in mind that the work of women authors—and in particular those who write fiction—is growing every day more copious and gaining greater influence. It was significant that the three novels of the year 1888 which most aroused the readers of English, and were talked about until the very sound of their titles caused weariness, came from the pens of women. The attention they drew was not the result of impropriety, but of strength, originality, and independence. Yet “*Elsmere*,” “*John Ward*,” and the “*African Farm*” all showed a boldness which, only a generation ago, would have been thought foreign to the feminine mind and censurable if found there.

More than a little of the fiction produced by women nowadays might, if issued anonymously, pass easily as the work of men. This statement is not made as a compliment or the reverse, but simply as a citation of fact for observers of literature, or psychology, or social metamorphosis. Two or three of the more eminent examples in point, within the last forty years, have been very striking. And I may say here, it is an interesting circumstance that the stories published by Miss Murfree under the style of “*Charles Egbert Craddock*” were everywhere supposed to be a man’s stories until she disclosed her identity; after which the fact that she was known to be a woman seems to have reacted on

the authoress and to have affected her writing. For she then gave free play to an exaggerated sentimentality of description which previously she had curbed. Mrs. Elizabeth Stoddard, in quite another line, is an instance of a woman writing with that sort of vigor which, for want of a more searching and pliable term, we call masculine. There is a certain impartiality which every good novelist must have if he or she would write truthfully and strongly. It is not so much that the author should lose his or her personality in the imaginative representation of life. It is, rather, that he or she should be freed from the narrow bounds of that mere conventional identity to which we are all confined so long as we consent to regard ourselves simply as others regard us—as one of the crowd who must behave and think in a set manner. The author must rise out of this little individuality into the larger one of a free, observant, independent mind—quite untrammelled by personal considerations—before he or she can depict life well in novel or play. If this privilege is to be denied to women, it is clear that their function as authors must be seriously limited. But it is equally clear that they do not intend to submit to such denial.

Mrs. Stoddard's novels have recently been reprinted, and have won deserved recognition and praise after a long delay. But imagine the shock with which an unready public, twenty-five years ago, must have read these remarks by Roxalana, a moral, obedient, and kindly woman, in Mrs. Stoddard's "Temple House":

"I do not see what a profound love has to do with principle or reason. If love was not a *separate power, impregnable to conscience*, human nature would be a feebly-sustained thing. It [love] should exist for itself and by itself; and then, through it, we poor creatures may be exalted in spite of vice and crime."

Or this, from the villain of the story, who sets forth brutally, but beyond contradiction, a considerable part of the truth:

"I love you. Do you know what I mean? Do you understand men, my princess? We are procreators, providers, protectors, but we are lustful, acute, selfish for you women: the best, wisest, most tender hero is also what I say. What would be the form of society, if he were not so? When our functions cease, let us be children again and gentle, fulfilling the charities again, and bridge our way to heaven."

This is far from being the whole truth; yet it is an essential portion of it; and, without a clear perception of this, the finer and lovelier half of the entire truth about human nature cannot be distinctly and completely comprehended. Mrs. Stoddard vividly presents that other half, and it is quite certain that her sym-

pathies are with it, and that her influence is cast without hesitation upon the side of good morals and honest conduct. That she openly recognizes and carefully weighs each element is a proof of her strength and veracity. That it is a woman who thus holds the scales is a circumstance which demands our serious and respectful attention. Yet when Mrs. Stoddard began to publish, it was deemed unfitting for a woman to give to the world with so much candor the results of such clear-sighted observation as hers. It was thought to be audacity; and it is audacity now. Yet there are times when audacity is needed. Another of Mrs. Stoddard's personages, an old serving-woman, Chloë, says: "When we want to commit a deadly sin, the most of us are n't a mite afraid; but in the 'How are yous?' and the 'Do come agains,' we are scared." This is the spirit which causes society to take fright at the boldness of some modern women in their books. But the emancipation which is going on should, on the whole, I think, be accepted as the sign of a healthful change.

It is not to be wished that women should affect mannishness in their writing any more than that men should become womanish. There is a ground upon which both can meet on terms of equality, retaining their separate attributes and yet exchanging them to some extent—that is, the ground of their art. Coleridge was, perhaps, the first thinker who brought out distinctly the principle that the highest creative genius in a man must include the feminine quality. At all events, every one now recognizes the truth of this; and therefore we must accept the converse, that the greatest imaginative genius in a woman must include something of the masculine quality. The tenderness, the intuitive comprehension of moods or sentiments, the breadth and intensity of emotion in Robert Browning do not for a moment hide the masculine nature of his mental action; the close-grained, robust muscularity of thought, as we may say, which is one of his greatest traits. Nor did the intellect of Mrs. Browning, though strong and direct beyond that of the average of her sex, and fitted to grapple with severe facts or hard problems, make her any the less truly or obviously a woman in her poetry. George Eliot and George Sand did the work, surely, of men in literature, so far as strength and grasp are concerned. They illustrate that converse of Coleridge's proposition which I have just drawn out. Yet the last and closest analysis would be likely to reveal a preponderant

influence of the writer's sex, even in George Eliot and George Sand. This is quite natural; nor do we want to have the male or the female mind transformed one into the other. Either may include, say, an octave of the other's natural register; just as there are men with high tenor voices and women with deep contralto tones, the *timbre* of which, however, discriminates them. The discrimination cannot be made so easily nor so sharply in literature; but this image will suggest my meaning. In fact, as was remarked before, women's writings may often be mistaken for men's. But I think it has now been shown that the woman in such a case need not lose or in any way discredit her feminine nature.

Every imaginative mind of the best and strongest sort must unite some of the elements of both sexes; as the perfect flower contains alike stamen and pistil. It is from such union in one mind, whether lodged in man or woman, that the richest bloom and most substantial fruitage of poetry and fiction must come. Of course the blending may occur in many different proportions, giving an endless variety of intermixture. But what I am trying to do here is to trace a natural law which affects artistic minds, and to clear away the sand-heaps of prejudice that constantly fall in on the explorer. If the law exist in the noblest types of creative mind and the world's finest literature, we have no right to hinder women from obeying it. And it appears that an increasing number of them recognize the law and the right which it confers. The shock that causes the sand-heaps to tumble in and blind a good many of us comes when women authors choose to deal frankly with sin and vice and crime as a part of the spectacle of life, a very serious and uncompromising element in our existence. The clods of primitive humanity, and the earthy stains of that low estate from which we gradually arose as a race of intelligent beings, still cling to us. It is mortifying and unpleasant to think upon; nor is it flattering to our pride to reflect that brain and soul are joined to a physical nature which has an ugly and depressing side. But as we are all obliged to live under the shadow of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it will be wise to make the best of our lot, and to throw as much light as possible into the shadow, in the hope of finally dispersing it. Women can aid in doing this quite as well as men, and possibly, in the end, much more efficaciously than men.

Probably a great many aberrations and extravagancies of the feminine mind will occur in the course of the new development which it is taking. These must be expected, and should be met with all available composure. Men have had full swing for their aberrations during a long period, and ought not to be surprised if women use the same privilege. But there is no reason in the nature of things why the books of women, if they are thought to be bad in tendency, should be condemned simply because women wrote them. We do not regard a bad book with any added horror because a man is the author; and, as I have tried to point out, in authorship both sexes come upon a common ground. Neither is a woman's good book any the better because a woman wrote it. The novels of Ouida are full of genius, imagination, and powerful character-drawing; but, in the main, are morbid and unwholesome. It matters nothing to the world, essentially, that they emanate from a woman's mind. A few young women, in the last two or three years, have taken pains to put forth trashy and lascivious novels, which have given the talkers of nonsense a great deal to talk about. But so far as the effect on readers goes, it would make no whit of difference who scribbled these tales, if the talkers of nonsense would refrain from laying stress on the fact that they were scribbled by girls. These young women are trading on their sex. They offer us a mere travesty or mockery of the law that the really strong and honest women of great intellect follow, in writing seriously and sincerely about that very serious, but sometimes *insincere*, thing, human life and society. Take away from these young women the false importance now foolishly ascribed to the fact of their sex, and you take away all that part of their stock in trade which seems to cast discredit on womanhood. For when they write vicious books, they really lower only themselves, and not their sex collectively.

These are the persons who give to audacity in women novelists a bad meaning. But, on the other side of the account, we have a lengthening list of those women who have been audacious in the good sense. Mrs. Humphry Ward, Margaret Deland, and Olive Schreiner all appear in that list. Many others are included in it; but I will take the liberty of mentioning only Mrs. Amelia E. Barr. If she did not represent, even though unconsciously, the great advance of women in entering upon their right publicly to discuss troublesome evils, she would not have published her paper

on "Conversational Immoralities." Mrs. Barr is throwing light into the shadow ; and so are many other thoughtful and worthy women.

We have already drawn far away from the plaintive harp, the twilight, and the patient embroidery days of "The Female Poets of America." We have left behind us the tranquil repose of Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, Miss Sedgwick, and the Misses Warner (in their several kinds and degrees). We have reached a stage when the diary of Marie Bashkirtseff stirs up a popular interest that shows how eager the world is to have a fuller and freer literary expression of the life and the thinking of women. That diary seems to be a somewhat abnormal affair: still, it throws light; and this is what we want—throwing light into the shadow. Never fear! There will always be mystery enough in our life, without our cultivating it artificially where no mystery need be. The instinctive and vigorous advance of women towards the free and open discussion of matters which are possibly of even more vital moment to them than to any one else appears to me most encouraging. It is in accord with the larger liberty extended to them in all fields of action,—in law, medicine, theology, and business,—and their quiet assumption of freedom in literature is an inevitable result of the gains which they have made in other directions.

The world reveres Shakespeare; but it has no reason to be proud of his grossness; and critics make every effort to remove the blot of it from his fame. It may possibly happen that in the future we shall have some female Shakespeare who will defy decency as much as the greatest of English men poets defied it. That would be a gruesome result of the emancipation of women's minds. Still, we should have to face it. But I do not think it will come. More and more, women are learning what this world is in which they live; and, as they learn, they are inclined to talk and write about it, and to lessen the bestiality and misery they see here. Their influence is for purity; and, notwithstanding the unworthy lapses of some of them who write viciously, the more swiftly their freedom in literature is granted, the speedier will their triumph in the cause of purity be.

Human nature has a higher temperature than a glacier, but it moves just as slowly. We should remember this, when judging this movement of women which has now begun. I believe that,

by the mingling of free feminine thought with the current of literature, we shall be borne on to a most desirable goal. If women express themselves freely in books, they will learn to understand their own nature better than they do now ; and men also will understand it better. Shakespeare, with all his comprehensiveness, placed life before us mainly from the masculine point of view. Not until the view of women shall receive a similar illustration can the imaginative genius of humanity reach its greatest development. When the feminine and the masculine shall be thoroughly combined by a general meeting of minds in literature, as they are combined now only in the single minds of certain individuals, we shall get something like a complete expression of life. This result may take for its fulfilment a thousand years. But we may as well begin training the eyes of the race to see it ; so that, when it shall become a reality, it may be greeted as giving a prospect of multiplied happiness and of a long-continuing, victorious progress.

GEORGE PARSONS LATHROP.